

Missy Hyatt: More Than Professional Wrestling's Sex Symbol?

By - Paul MacArthur

Buxom, blonde and, more often than not, portrayed as a bimbo, Missy Hyatt - for better or for worse - has personified the role of women in professional wrestling. For some, she has been the symbol of all that is wrong with women in wrestling as she has often relied on her looks, flowing blonde locks and cup size to get her personality over more than her intelligence, athletic ability or charm. To many, however, she has happily been professional wrestling's sex symbol, an element of the sex and violence formula that permeates most forms of mass entertainment.

Criticisms, from her sometimes less than insightful commentary to her spoiled brat character to her choice of apparel, continue to be hurled in Hyatt's direction from several sources, including Paul E. Dangerously. While the incessant need to criticize Hyatt may stem from the fact that everyday her role slaps the ill founded trendy theory of political correctness in the face, there is room for debate. Is there a place for Hyatt or, more specifically, her character in professional wrestling today? Does this character hinder or help the sport. Should all women in the wrestling business be as athletically gifted and intensely trained as Madusa Micelli? Most importantly, if a character draws money, does it matter whether she is portrayed as a promiscuous vixen, an intelligent straight laced athlete, or somewhere in between?

The role of women in professional wrestling is a curious one. They are predominately portrayed as bimbos or property. Rarely does a woman call the shots, and rarer still does one command respect. Women in wrestling attain their status because of their chest size and beauty. To a much lesser extent, their personality plays a part as well. Sherri Martel is an example personality playing an important part of her success, but how nature endowed her confuses that argument. There have been women with less than striking appearances who have become popular; Sapphire for example. But in most of those instances, they were attached to an already popular male wrestler. By and large, the female in wrestling, from Sunshine to Precious to Dark Journey to Sherri Martel to Woman to Lady Blossom to the girlfriend of the week in Memphis, has been a sex object facilitating heel victories to simultaneously garner the lust and hatred of the fans, and, in some cases, the violence of the wrestlers. Again, there are exceptions, most notably Elizabeth, Sunshine and Hyatt in their babyface roles, but generally the female in wrestling has been heel window dressing, serving as a distraction through sexual imagery. No one has done this better over the past few years than Hyatt, but her desire to explore other avenues within the profession has caused resentment similar to that received by affirmative action candidates.

From accusations of incompetence to tabloid style sensationalistic attacks on her personal life, Hyatt has rarely received words of praise for anything other than her physical beauty. Indeed, the “it’s who she knows not what she knows” argument has often been raised to discredit her role in World Championship Wrestling. Certainly, the case can successfully be made that were it not for her relationships with John Tatum and Eddie Gilbert, Missy Hyatt would not be currently under contract for WCW. Nor would she have feuded with Sunshine in World Class, formed Hot Stuff Incorporated and been at the forefront of several Gilbert inspired ideas over the years. That fact cannot be debated. The question is, did Hyatt learn the wrestling business over the years well enough to be a valued employee? If so, is at as a commentator, analyst, journalist, manager or display piece? If not, is there really a debate?

Over the past several years, Hyatt has assumed a number of roles, with varying degrees of success. From the spoiled brat to the pretty babyface, she has always been successful at doing one thing: getting audience attention. The reaction Hyatt receives in any arena this side of Japan, and for that matter probably Japan as well, will often supersede the reaction to all but the top babyfaces of any promotion. The reasons for this can be debated for months, but they don’t change the fact that professional wrestling is in an era where few wrestlers are able to generate any reaction, positive or negative, from a crowd. Meanwhile, Hyatt is able to do it solely by walking into an arena. Hyatt is over in WCW and has been for quite sometime. But, not unlike most every other WCW performer who has achieved popular status, she has been misused. WCW’s failure to capitalize on this is more of a commentary on their incompetence than Hyatt’s talent.

All of this leads to Dangerously’s recent comments about Hyatt. Dangerously stated that there must be numerous women willing to be announcers for WCW who, unlike Hyatt, are qualified to be announcers and would serve the function of announcer/pseudo journalist better than Hyatt. While it would be easy to dismiss Dangerously’s statements as personal differences, he has raised important issues that need to be addressed. First and foremost, are there more qualified female announcers than Hyatt who, with some training, could be competent announcers? Absolutely. Would they play the role of a journalist better than Hyatt? Most likely. Could they get over as well as Hyatt portraying either a face or a heel? Maybe. If so, what qualities would they need to bring to this position? In an enlightened society, just talent. However, the qualities necessary for most any female to get over with today’s wrestling audience, and this is not a knock, are the same ones that got Hyatt noticed seven short years ago. Hence, the cyclical process is started over and while it would be ideal to use a female announcer solely for her announcing talent, that just isn’t going to happen in the near future, regardless of what elitist educational process is attempted.

Thus, in reviewing Dangerously’s remarks, he left out one important issue: what gets a woman a job in professional wrestling today is her appearance. Contacts also help, and to that end, women are really no different than many men in professional wrestling who obtain their jobs based on their physiques, who they are related to and who they know. For someone as perceptive as Dangerously to overlook this all to evident fact is either careless or an omission of the issue as it weakens his case. Given his personal feelings towards Hyatt, the later is more likely. Hence, while Dangerously raises valid points, they are much like the theories of economists, “if all other things remain equal.” Alas, for now the other variables are not equal and Dangerously’s case against Hyatt, regardless of its merits, is one that loses its credibility given the rules of the wrestling world.

If Hyatt has attained celebrity status and a six-figure contract in WCW, it is rudimentary common sense that WCW use her in the most effective manner possible. If that is to make her the most over announcer in the history of professional wrestling, then so be it. If it draws television ratings, then be grateful. If Hyatt's role is to be that of the heel manager who uses her looks and spoiled brat attitude to get what she wants, then so be it if it works. If it is to be the "First Lady of WCW" then, provided it sells tickets or draws ratings, by all means utilize it. Hyatt has talents that go beyond her looks and physique. While she is not the world's greatest announcer, she has improved over the years. If the promotion would work with her half as much as it has their bouncers of the week turned wrestlers, they would have either discovered Hyatt is a great talent or unfit for any position. Instead, they have changed her role in the promotion with such frequency that it's been impossible for her to gain any momentum, the Dangerously feud notwithstanding.

Hyatt has potential and, of equal importance to WCW, a six-figure contract. As proven in the past, television time with Hyatt is not wasted, if ratings are any indication. Thus, it is imperative WCW use one of its contracted performers to the maximum of her capabilities. Perhaps that may disgruntle some, but from a pure business perspective, there really isn't a choice. WCW has a talented, over performer whom they are ineffectively using. That is nothing new, but it should change immediately and finding the appropriate role for Hyatt is a step in the right direction. What role Hyatt will assume is anybody's guess. It could range from her becoming the Gayle Gardner of professional wrestling to the blonde distraction she has played before. The choice to some degree is her's.

The concept of a new enlightened world professional wrestling is an admirable one. A world where wrestlers are judged on their ability to work a match, a crowd, and draw. A world where announcers are judged by their ability to sell a match, get an angle over and lend credibility and humor when needed. A world where the cream really does rise to the top, regardless of the odds, be they social, physical or personal. It's an idealistic thought. In the meantime, when reality sets in, it is clear that world, though possibly attainable, isn't here today nor will it be tomorrow. Wrestling has changed tremendously over the past 10 years, but in many ways the game hasn't changed at all. A woman's role in professional wrestling, no matter what any enlightened, politically conscious person may tell you, is that of the sex object, with few exceptions. Fewer exceptions still, have been successful. Given that, and all the other evidence, the answer to the question "does Missy Hyatt have a role in WCW?" is a resounding yes. Unfortunately, unless WCW is truly as innovative as Bill Watts claims, the role will be nothing new. That aside, it is up to WCW to expeditiously utilize her talents to improve the company's bottom line. Indeed, should that happen, Hyatt may be the most valued performer in the promotion. Perhaps even in a respectable fashion.

Sidelines

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Bill Watts: Pushing Himself As WCW's Top Face

By - David Skolnick

Who's the most often seen wrestling personality in World Championship Wrestling today? Rick Rude, Sting, Ron Simmons, the Steiners? They should be, but they, along with the company's other wrestlers, are being forced to share their air time with a man who should be working behind the scenes. To the average fans viewing any of WCW television shows, Bill Watts, the company's executive Vice President for wrestling operations, is being seen and heard more than anyone else.

Since his hiring in May to run the ailing company, Watts has probably spent as much time in from of the camera as he has behind the scenes running the promotion. While Dusty Rhodes and K. Allen Frey were often criticized for their on-camera appearances, hardcores have all but ignored the fact that Watts is just as guilty of self promotion. This should come as no surprise since Watts has a proven history of putting himself over. When he ran Mid-South, he would often be "invited" to do color commentary with Boyd Pierce. Pierce would welcome Watts to the show and wouldn't say another word during the entire show - except to thank the Cowboy "for stopping by."

There are those who say Watts is an excellent announcer who adds color and sound analysis to the matches. However, what Watts masquerades as commentary is just a combination of shallow analysis and a couple of clichés, including the already infamous and tired "let's hook 'em up." At least when Rhodes does color, he uses a dozen or so tired clichés. I'd rather hear, "Let's get funky like a monkey, wheez, in public if you will, wheez," over what Watts offers behind the microphone. But the difference is hardcores call for Rhodes' head when he uses himself as an announcer while they praise Watts for his insight. Further, casual fans have no idea who Watts is and why he is there, other than he is the executive Vice President. The same could be said for Frey and look how successful that turned out. I would dare say that the number of fans who recognize Rhodes over Watts is voluminous. Average fans are probably wondering why Watts is on television all the time. I often wonder about that myself.

When Watts took over WCW, he inherited a much troubled company that had nearly hit rock bottom in every important category: television ratings, Pay Per View buy rates, house show attendance, merchandising and public perception. Watts showed when he ran Mid-South that he had the capabilities to operate a successful mid-sized promotion - at least by the standards set in the early eighties: television, house shows and perception. It can easily be argued that Mid-South programmed the hottest wrestling show ever to appear on television and except for the tail end of Watts' reign, house show attendance was extremely high. Now that he is in charge of WCW, he need to focus his attention improving in several important areas, especially PPV, where buy rates have reached embarrassing levels. Unfortunately, that is an area in which Watts is lacking experience. Instead of standing in front of a television camera co-hosting "WCW Saturday Night" or being featured as the guest on the "Ross Report" or creating heat for himself as he announces an important WCW event, the Cowboy should be working on improving the company's dismal PPV buy rates. When he ran Mid-South, Watts' other strong point was developing new stars, including the Junkyard Dog, Steve Williams, Jim Duggan and Sting, among others. Watts has done a good job with Simmons, but he needs to develop others young stars if the company is ever expected to grow.

The television product has improved since Watts took over, in spite of Watts ever present commentary, and in time the rating should pick up. The Cowboy is the master at creating intense television and even though he is forced to do it for five shows and six hours every week, he has shown that he is capable of doing it and doing it well. Watts shouldn't be wasting his time attempting to steal the show as a color man who has quickly become one of the most interviewed personalities in the company. The company is overloaded with talented color men - including Jesse Ventura, Larry Zbyszko, Michael Hayes and Jimmy Garvin - many of whom do no commentating for the company at all. The company needs improvement in many areas, but color commentators is definitely not one of those categories.

Although Watts has only been with the company for a few short months, there have been a significant number of changes, including no off the top rope moves, fines for no shows, and heels and faces not being able to associate in public. Some see these rules as the foundation for a solid wrestling promotion, while others dislike some or all of them. Morale is reportedly at an all-time low. But Watts and many hardcores insist it's all part of a master plan to improve the company. Because Watts is viewed by some as the company's savior, many of his decisions have not been questioned. That's probably the main reason no one has criticized his decision to push himself as WCW top color man. Admittedly, Watts has a vision and a great deal of talent, but he should be concentrating all his energy on making WCW the best wrestling promotion in the world and not making himself the company's top face.

What About The Casual Fans?

By - Michael McGowen

Not a week passes without the discussion over what wrestling's presentation should or should not be by newsletter editors, columnists and readers. Everyone has an opinion, well thought out or not, but all commentary flows from the smallest segment of fans, the hardcore community. A very neglected source of opinions is the largest segment, the casual fans. Who speaks for them, or understands what they want? You could say their opinions are understood because all of us were at one time, casual fans. But do we really understand what they want to see? After all, hardcore fans have a different perspective on wrestling based on knowledge from newsletters and research that casual fans do not have access, or possibly the desire, to obtain. We simply view wrestling from a different angle. How often does the hardcore community associate with them, not counting attending matches at the same time and same place? Do we look upon them as "marks" in the same manner those in the business have always done? Perhaps the casual fans express their opinions with their remote controls and their wallets. But isn't that an end result, the final vote on the presented product? What are their specific likes and dislikes? What changes would they make and what would they maintain? I've spent some time asking such questions of casual fans who are friends and acquaintances, as well as total strangers met attending matches or watching Pay Per Views. Some of the answers may surprise you as much as they did me.

I've found most casual fans to be quite knowledgeable about wrestling, understanding the difference between showy holds and maneuvers and those based upon legitimate wrestling or martial arts. Many feel the majority of maneuvers used today lack credibility and believability. Surprisingly, a great deal of the

spectacular aerial moves from the top rope were mentioned in this category, including those used by the Legion of Doom, Brian Pillman and Jushin Liger. It was mentioned that none of these have anything to do with wrestling. A style combining today's fast paced amateur freestyle wrestling with the best of professional wrestling's 1970s era would be the most exciting and would capture their interest more often. Many would like even more realism than we might have imagined, and the Rick and Scott Steiner vs. Terry Gordy and Steve Williams match at the Clash of the Champions was pointed out as an example.

Most casual fans understand wrestling is a show, but respect the toughness and athletic skills of the wrestlers. That fact isn't emphasized enough in their eyes; the circus like atmosphere has become to prevalent. Wrestling has become much like a bad cartoon with live actors... sound familiar? None of it makes any sense, especially with name and character changes, meaningless titles and contender lists, refusal to acknowledge history and embarrassingly juvenile storylines. Even the kids are beginning to turn off wrestling, especially the WWF. While far from the majority, the number of kids turning to WCW was surprising. Many of the storylines appearing in the WWF are beyond their understanding, an example being the Ric Flair vs. Randy Savage feud. They seem to be looking for the more standard hero vs. villain situation, something many adults wanted to see. While babyface vs. babyface and heel vs. heel matches will work, a watering down of those traditional roles won't.

The perception of both WCW and the WWF is a complex one. While the WWF has the biggest names and is popular, many cited WCW as having better athletes and tougher matches. The casual fans enjoy each promotion equally for their particular style. Many adults stated that, while they enjoy WCW, they take their children to see the WWF matches because that's what the kids want to see. These fans felt there was room for both promotions because of the differences in presentation. Favoritism boiled down to what the fan watched wrestling for: melodrama or action.

What about those fans who have abandoned wrestling over the past eight years? Confusion and disgust with the changes were the most named reasons for their lack of interest. To these people, wrestling has become such a big joke that it isn't worth watching anymore. If wrestling could return to the old days they might be lured back as fans. When offhandedly mentioning the new rules and direction Bill Watts is implementing at WCW, many said such changes could bring them back.

I found that the casual fans I spoke with are looking for the same direction the hardcores seek. The main point hammered on was the realism factor: they want to doubt wrestling is fake. Wrestling can't be presented in the manner of the Hulk Hogan era any longer or it will die from apathy. The casual fans are more knowledgeable and looking for a realistic athletic angle in wrestling. The only difference between hardcores and the casual fans is that we're not as smart as we might think.

The History Of The Stereotype: Part I

By - The Phantom Of The Ring

Wrestling is, at its base, an exploitation game. During the twenties and thirties, it developed the ability to latch onto whatever fad was in style, whether athletically, culturally or socially. To trace the roots of this, we must first look at how wrestling changed in the twenties.

Prior to World War I, professional wrestling was governed by many of the same conventions that governed boxing. It was touted as a legitimate sport and was often treated as such by the legitimate press. To look at photos of such stars as Frank Gotch, Fred Beell, Stan and Waldek Zbyszko, and compare them with photos of the likes of John L. Sullivan and Jim Corbett is to notice no difference whatsoever. Gotch, Beell and the rest looked like professional athletes; they wore no makeup, no masks and no tassels.

Professional wrestling matches back then were divided into two kinds: the championship match, often held at a major arena or field, and the carny show, held in the carnival or fair. The difference between the two was in the promotion. The former was promoted as a serious sporting event. The wrestlers were presented as world-class athletes, vying for whatever laurels were on the line. The latter was staged mainly for the betting enjoyment for the audience. Aspiring professionals would use the carny to tune up for the big city circuit. Most of the shenanigans occurred at the carny; some of them would haunt a wrestler for the rest of his career. Gotch and Jim Londos couldn't defend their championships in several states because of outstanding indictments for fraud.

There were two basic forms of the wrestling scam practiced at the carny level. The first involved the use of a plant in the audience. The plant would usually be dressed like a workingman and would gravitate towards whatever ethnic group was most enthusiastic, passing himself off as a Greek, German, Pole, etc. While his two confederates grappled in the ring, the plant would make observations about how he was better than either man in the ring and could easily beat both if given a chance. The suckers, by now worked up, offered to back their man with money. The plant would then go into the ring and proceed to lose. The suckers would be fleeced and the wrestlers would be all the richer.

In the second, the wrestler barnstormed the countryside, taking on all "challengers" at fairs and carnivals. Unseen by the crowd were the usual opponents. These opponents were usually the ones chosen to fight the champ, and, depending on the amount wagered, either beat the time limit or got pinned. Gotch was a past master at this form of swindle, using it to great effect in the logger camps of Alaska under the name "Frank Kennedy" in 1901.

The serious form of professional wrestling was soon to take a tumble, the victim, as it were, of a double-whammy. The first blow came when Gotch retired in 1913. Thanks to his tussles with George Hackenschmidt, Gotch was a big name and drawing card. Injuries and wild living caught up with him, however, and forced his retirement. A tournament was held to determine his successor, but until Joe Stecher appeared on the scene in 1915, the sport of professional wrestling suffered its first depression.

The second blow was the first World War, and it was to prove ultimately more damaging to wrestling than Gotch's retirement. At the time the war broke out, Earl Caddock was the world's champion. An extremely popular champion, Caddock used a form of a flying tackle to end his matches. He was drafted into the army, gassed on the battlefield, and was never the same again. His absence from the game, and reduced skills upon his return, diminished his popularity.

Pro wrestling still had big stars in Stecher, Strangler Lewis and the Zbyszkos, and upcoming stars such as Londos and Ray Steele. But the pizzazz was gone; the fans were tired of two-hour draws and instead spent

their dollars on boxing, which boasted such leading lights as Jess Willard, George Carpentier and Jack Dempsey. The question now turned from where to stage the next match to if a next match was staged. At this point, a savior came into the game. His name was Joseph "Toots" Mondt. Mondt was a carny grappler, who also had preliminary bouts on championship cards. His real contribution, however, came from his fertile mind.

Mondt had a relatively simple idea, but an idea whose time had truly come. Although wrestling historians generally credit Mondt with hatching the idea of "working" a match; technically, this was not true, for wrestling had always been worked in some form or another during its history. Mondt's idea was simply to standardize the matches; the same match worked in Kansas City could be worked a week later in Los Angeles. Who would be the wiser?

Mondt's partner in this venture, Strangler Lewis, not only saw the virtue in this scheme, but also knew the value of a good angle from his experience in a New York tournament held in 1915. It was the first tournament in this country to use a masked man as one of its participants and Lewis remembered that most of the fanfare was devoted to this hooded wrestler, and the promoters made the most of the mystery man.

Wrestling was two-thirds of the way to a total revamp. It remained for an immigrant ballet director to supply the final piece to the puzzle. He was Jack Pfeffer.

Pfeffer, an immigrant ethnic Russian, noticed the potential of ethnic crowds who just couldn't warm up to such sports as boxing or baseball, but stuck mostly to soccer. Wrestling was much bigger in Europe than here and was much more attuned to ethnic angles. Pfeffer adapted that here and sold his product to each ethnic group. There was a Russian champion, a Jewish champion and Italian champion and so on.

Thus wrestling was being splintered to fit each ethnic pocket in the locality. There still existed a "mainstream" audience and that audience was exploited by Mondt and Lewis, among others, who, during the twenties, opted for All-American college football types over ethnics. It wasn't until the thirties, when the depression hit and folks were tighter with their entertainment dollars, that wrestling would see an ethnic champion in a mainstream promotion.

Next Issue: Part II - How Wrestling Adapted In The Twenties

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